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ABSTRACT

This first in a four-part series on why academic achievement gaps persist discusses how to raise minority achievement. It explains how earlier progress in closing the gap has stalled, while at the same time, the greater diversity of student populations and the rapid growth of the Hispanic population and of other ethnic groups have reshaped the problem with a more complex set of issues (e.g., limited English proficiency and lack of parental participation). The paper also focuses on achievement issues related to Asian American students, discussing how to define Asian Americans and noting the many cultural differences among Asian groups. Finally, the paper explains that even in well-off suburbs, minority student achievement lags behind that of majority student achievement. One reason for such disparity may be the racial makeup in high-powered academic classes, which provide students with the most challenging work. Nationwide, educators and African American leaders are saying that multi-pronged efforts are necessary to raise achievement levels among minority students. Subtle barriers to minority students' success often relate to teachers' negative attitudes, parents' reluctance to aggressively advocate for their children, and peer pressure to be popular that undermines academic achievement. (SM)

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ED 458 334

UNMET PROMISE:
RAISING MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT
THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

PART ONE OF A FOUR-PART SERIES

EDUCATION WEEK, v. 19 n. 27

March 15, 2000

Robert C. Johnston
Debra Viadero

Editorial Projects in Education

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March 2000-April 2000

The Achievement Gap

About 3.4 million students entered kindergarten in U.S. public schools last fall, and already, at the dawn of their educational careers, researchers foresee widely different futures for them. Whether they are white, black, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian-American will, to a large extent, predict their success in school, whether they go to college, and how much money they will earn as adults. Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education. In this four-part series, *Education Week* asks: Why do achievement gaps persist?

This project is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

Part One:"Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement," March 15, 2000. After decades of school desegregation efforts, during which the gap between blacks and whites closed substantially, progress has stalled. At the same time, the greater diversity of the school population and the rapid growth of the Hispanic population and other ethnic groups have reshaped the problem with a more complex set of issues. Includes:

- "Views Over the Gap";
- "As the U.S. Hispanic Population Soars, Raising Performance Becomes Vital"; and
- "Who Is 'Asian'? Cultural Differences Defy Simple Categories."

Part Two: "Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations," March 22, 2000. If the researchers studying the reasons why black and Hispanic students continue to trail non-Hispanic whites in academic achievement were pressed to say one thing for certain about their work, it might be this: The usual explanations arenít good enough. Includes:

- "In L.A's Koreatown, a Relentless Focus on Schooling,"
- "Students in Dire Need of Good Teachers Often Get the Least Qualified or Less Experienced."

Part Three:"Minority Gaps Smaller in Some Pentagon Schools," March 29, 2000. Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

Part Four:"Lifting Minority Achievement: Complex Answers," April 5, 2000. The Minority Achievement Committee is Shaker Heights' best-known antidote to the nagging academic achievement gap that separates black and Hispanic students from their white and Asian-American counterparts here and in schools nationwide. Includes:

- "In a Texas District, Test Scores For Minority Students Have Soared."

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Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

March 15, 2000

Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement

By Robert C. Johnston and Debra Viadero
Education Week

First of a four-part series

About 3.4 million students entered kindergarten in U.S. public schools last fall, and already, at the dawn of their educational careers, researchers foresee widely different futures for them.

Whether they are white, black, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian-American will, to a large extent, predict their success in school, whether they go to college, and how much money they will earn as adults.

By 2019, when they are 24 years old, current trends indicate that the white children who are now nearing the end of their first year in school will be twice as likely as their African-American classmates, and three times as likely as Hispanics, to have a college degree.

The disparity in school performance tied to race and ethnicity, known as the achievement gap, shows up in grades, test scores, course selection, and college completion. It happens in cities and in suburbs and in rural school districts. The gaps are so pronounced that in 1996, several national tests found African-American and Hispanic 12th graders scoring at roughly the same levels in reading and math as white 8th graders.

After decades of school desegregation efforts, during which the gap between blacks and whites closed substantially, progress has stalled. At the same time, the greater diversity of the school population and the rapid growth of the Hispanic population and other ethnic groups have reshaped the problem with a more complex set of issues.

Those factors, combined with a much stronger focus on test scores in K-12 education and the erosion of affirmative action policies in university admissions, have raised the achievement-gap issue to the forefront of the national debate about schools, and created a new sense that something needs to be done.

"Closing the gap has to be a societal goal," said Raul Yzaguirre, the president of the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic advocacy group in Washington. "To do otherwise is to admit to failure, tolerate racial differences, and give up on the very fundamental ideals of America."

The stakes are high—and not only for the millions of children whose lives will be most directly affected. For the nation as a whole, the economic and cultural implications of a continued failure to fully prepare millions of minority children for a complicated and technology-driven economy are huge.

And some experts believe the future of public education is on the line as well. At a time when American schools have committed themselves to high standards for all students, an inability to close the achievement gaps may lead parents in minority communities to lose faith in the ability of the schools to educate their children.

"This may be the last opportunity that the state and school districts have to respond and keep

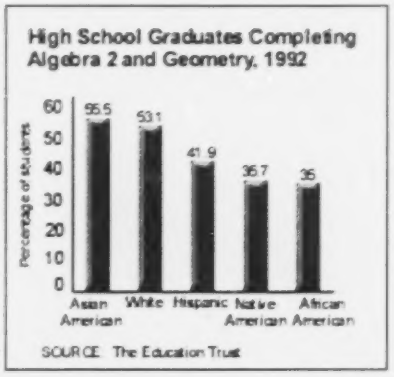
minority parents supportive of public schools," said Greg Mahout, the executive director of the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center, a non-profit advocacy group for low-income people which is located in Raleigh, N.C.

Just as African-Americans are taking a second look at traditional desegregation remedies as a way of raising the quality of education, he suggested, so too might they begin seeking tuition vouchers to leave the public schools altogether.

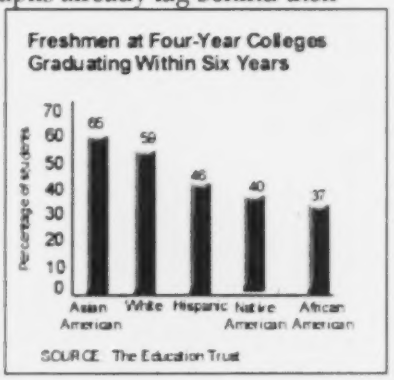
Societal Changes

Demographic projections have inspired much of the new concern over the achievement gap. African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians now account for one-third of the 54 million children in the nation's K-12 classrooms. That share, statisticians predict, will grow to two-thirds over the next 15 years.

So, too, will grow the share of minority children whose parents are poor or lack a high school diploma, according to data compiled for the College Board by the RAND Corp. in Santa Monica, Calif. For example, Hispanic children, who were 2.2 times more likely than white children to grow up in poverty a decade ago, will be 2.6 times more likely to be poor in 2015. "America is a diverse society in which educational differences have the potential to become a progressively larger source of inequality and social conflict," a national task force on minority achievement formed in 1997 by the College Board wrote in its report last fall.



Disparities in academic achievement between different racial and ethnic groups appear early. By kindergarten, minority pupils already lag behind their white classmates in early reading and math skills. The gaps widen in elementary school and then remain fixed through high school, according to Meredith Phillips, a researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles and the co-editor of *The Black-White Test Score Gap* .That 1998 book concludes that blacks scored below three-quarters of their white counterparts on a whole range of standardized tests, including the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests that showed minority 12th graders scoring on par with younger white students. "For African-Americans to catch up by the time they get to high school, they're going to have to work twice as hard," Ms. Phillips said.



Even more frustrating, the gaps appear greatest at the top of the achievement spectrum. Though they make up one-third of high school seniors, African-American, Hispanic, and American Indian students accounted for only one in 10 of the 12th graders who scored at the "advanced" levels on the most recent NAEP reading, mathematics, and science tests.

There are exceptions among minority groups in their school performance. Asian-Americans constitute a disproportionate share of top students. Some evidence suggests that black students who have immigrated from Caribbean nations may do almost as well.

But the one improvement that many educators had hoped to see as more blacks and Hispanics rose to the middle class has failed to emerge: Stubborn gaps persist even in integrated, largely middle-class suburbs like Evanston, Ill., and Montclair, N.J.

"If districts like Montclair can't make a difference, then people have a right to look at alternatives," warned Michael J. Osnato, the superintendent of schools in the suburban New Jersey district of 5,930 students about 10 miles south of New York City.

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Early Progress

During the 1970s and 1980s, blacks and Hispanics made strides in narrowing the academic gulf separating them from their white counterparts. From 1970, for example, when NAEP first started taking a pulse on student achievement, to the 1990s, the gap between minority and majority groups shrank by nearly half.

David Grissmer, a senior management scientist at RAND, said changes flowing from the civil rights movement, school desegregation, and the federal anti-poverty programs of the 1960s helped nudge African-Americans' scores up. While blacks in newly desegregated Southern schools racked up the largest gains in that period, test scores for Northern blacks improved, too.

"I think all of it made the nation more aware that African-American students' education was going to be taken more seriously," Mr. Grissmer said.

The improvements in minority achievement were also beginning to translate to real gains in college-going rates. National data show that African-Americans and, to a lesser degree, Hispanics, were graduating from high school and enrolling in college at rates near those of whites. Beneath the surface, however, disparities remained. For one, even though more minority students were going to college, disproportionately few of them were leaving with diplomas.

By 1988, even the test-score improvements had seemingly come to a halt, and experts are still wondering why. Explanations run the gamut from statistical anomalies attributable to changes in testing procedures to the distractions presented by the birth of "hip hop" culture.

"What we did was make progress on very rudimentary skills," said Kati Haycock, the executive director of the Education Trust, a Washington-based organization that promotes high academic standards for all students. "By the 1980s, that stretch had literally maxed out, and that should have been a signal for us to shift strategies."

National studies by the Education Trust and other groups show that minority students, many of whom attend poor, urban schools, get poorer-quality instruction than their white or suburban counterparts. They take fewer Advanced Placement and honors courses, have less qualified teachers, get fewer resources, and face harsher discipline when they violate school rules.

Some of the statistics are striking:
• Nearly half of New York City's teaching force in the 1997-98 school year had failed certification tests in math—compared with a little over a fifth of teachers in the surrounding suburbs and less than a quarter of the teachers throughout the rest of the state.
• Even though black students make up 23 percent of the student population in Providence, R.I., they constitute only 9 percent of students in the district's gifted and AP classes. Similar imbalances can be found in advanced classes elsewhere, including Austin, Texas; Boston; Durham, N.C.; and San Francisco.
• In San Francisco, African-American students are suspended from school in numbers more than three times their proportion of the school population.
• From birth to high school graduation, the average child in New York City will see about $25,975 less spent on his or her education than the average child elsewhere in the state, according to a recent report by the Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based organization of urban districts.

"Though the discrimination may not be intentional, its persistence and pervasiveness, as measured by actual statistical impacts, amounts to a deep pattern of institutional racism in U.S. public schools," contends the Applied Research Center, an Oakland, Calif.-based organization that collected some of the statistics listed above in a study of 12 urban districts.

When teachers expect less of students, they get less—and that can skew standards from school to school. Data from the U.S. Department of Education suggest, for example, that an A student in a big-city school is achieving at about the same level as B and C students in suburban districts.

Seeking Answers

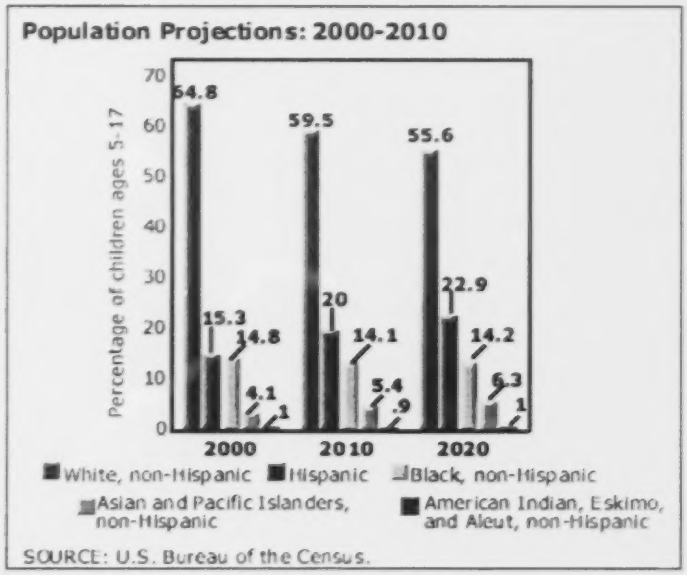
But some experts also blame a peer culture among African Americans that puts down top-notch students as "acting white."

"Kids care more about the reactions of their peers than they do about the reactions of their parents or teachers, and that's real," said Terry Pollack, the chairman of the social studies department at Shaker Heights High School in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a middle-class Cleveland suburb.

Researchers also chalk up some of the differences to variations in parenting. Anecdotal evidence suggests, for example, that white parents may interact with their young children in ways that better support school success. They might, for example, ask children more questions or to justify their requests.

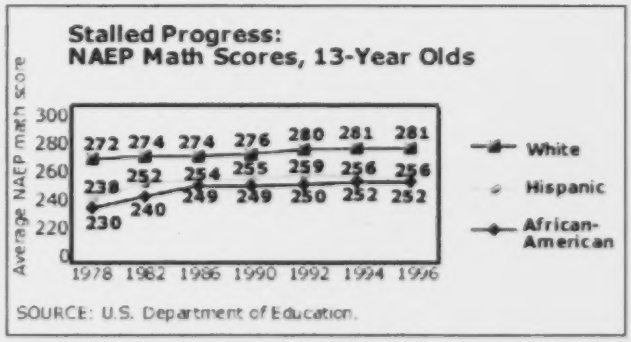
And as children get older, African-American and Hispanic parents may be less inclined to pressure them to do well in school or to push for their placement in advanced classes.

"The gap in test scores may be influenced by the level of insistence on the part of parents that children engage their studies seriously," said James Edward Harris, the president of the Montclair chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the education coordinator for the organization's New Jersey conference. "There is a level of underinvolvement of black folks at every level of the education enterprise."



There is far too little research about the various theories, however, and the bottom line is that no one knows for sure what causes the achievement gap.

Poverty, while a big factor, does not account for all of the differences. Nor does family structure. All other things being equal, young children growing up in single-parent homes score just as high on preschool vocabulary tests as children from intact families.



And the idea that the disparities somehow stem from differences in genetic makeup, which drew widespread attention following the publication in 1994 of a book on the subject, *The Bell Curve* , is almost universally disputed by researchers in many fields.

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A 'Messy' Debate

A changing political climate, however, may be opening the way for a more definitive look at the problem and ways of dealing with it. "It's going to be messy because people are going to be saying stuff that other people don't want to hear or don't want to believe," said Ronald F. Ferguson, a Harvard University economist who is studying the achievement-gap issue. "But the way to get around it is to design research projects directed unflinchingly toward answering questions about which we have different beliefs."

Efforts are under way on many fronts—from individual schools and communities to national advocacy groups and think tanks—that promise new awareness of the seemingly preordained underachievement of so many children:

• Last year, the Council of the Great City Schools formed the National Task Force on Closing Achievement Gaps. The panel's first report came out last fall and identified more than a dozen city school systems where the gaps are narrowing. But the report also faulted districts for inconsistency in tracking achievement by race, language, gender, and income.

"We must have a sense of urgency about the work we do and how we do it; otherwise, we may, without an efficacious effort, lose another generation," said Clifford B. Janey, a co-chairman of the task force and the superintendent of the Rochester, N.Y., schools.

• Concerned about the lack of minorities at upper achievement levels, the College Board's 31-member task force has released reports in the past six months that review the extent of the problem, predict performance for different racial groups, and recommend how to raise minority success in higher education. "We are finding a much higher degree of tolerance for discussion than we experienced five to 10 years ago," said Edmund W. Gordon, a Yale University professor who co-chairs that panel.

•The National Urban League kicked off the Campaign for African-American Achievement last summer. Backed by a $25 million, five-year grant from the Lilly Endowment, the campaign urges black parents and local leaders to demand high achievement as the norm for their children and schools.

"We are trying to construct a different kind of group and peer message," said Hugh B. Price, the president of the New York City-based Urban League. "We are very encouraged by the results. There seems to be much greater thirst for achievement by young people than most people realize."

•A group of 15 suburban and small-city districts, many of them in university towns with well-to-do students, have formed a coalition to study and share data on non-Asian minority achievement. The group stands out because the minority students being studied have few of the financial hardships that slow academic performance.

"It's stunning that more of us were not disaggregating the numbers to get a better feel for our kids," said Allan Alson, the superintendent of the Evanston Township high school system near Chicago, who helped start the network. "Hopefully, this creates a spirit of cooperation and urgency."

• Inspired by the suburban districts' example, 27 city districts—including Fort Wayne, Ind.; Houston; Milwaukee; and Tulsa, Okla.—have also joined forces to tackle the problems.

Success Stories

As serious interest in the achievement gap grows, the stories behind several successes are beginning to emerge.

Texas A&M University researchers say that after studying the best schools for educating blacks and Hispanics in their state, they found that solid, consistent implementation of

curricular programs was more important than the programs themselves. "We have phonics and non-phonics schools, and they both do well," said Kenneth J. Meier, a liberal-arts professor at the university in College Station who worked on the studies.

Long-term leadership with high expectations is also important. "At the low end, districts give up and blame the environment," Mr. Meier said. "You never see that in good districts. Their attitude is, 'We can teach anybody to learn.'"

In U.S Department of Defense schools around the world, low-income, highly mobile minority students perform at levels that are much closer to their white peers' than in civilian-operated schools. The students in Defense Department schools, who are surrounded by a supportive military community, also significantly outperform their minority counterparts in civilian public schools.

A Washington think tank, the Heritage Foundation, scoured the nation last year before honoring seven principals of high-performing, low-income, and predominantly minority schools as part of its "No Excuses" campaign.

The principals' success was largely attributed to their having latitude in curricular and spending decisions, "tangible and unyielding goals," careful teacher recruitment, regular student assessments, and systematic parent outreach.

"Other schools don't study successful schools," said Samuel Casey Carter, a Heritage Foundation fellow who is writing a report on the study. "We must recognize and look at schools that reach and establish high levels of achievement."

If a lesson can be gleaned from such stories, it may be that reversing the trend is no accident.

Challenging the Myths

When officials of the Montgomery County, Md., schools sought to improve reading skills, they retrained principals and teachers, added a 90-minute daily reading block, and hired enough teachers to shrink reading classes to about 11 students.

The result? The proportion of black 2nd graders who were reading at grade level rose from 45 percent to 68 percent between February and June of last year. Though that figure was 10 percentage points behind the 78 percent for white students, the gap had been 17 points in February.

Aside from such inspired initiatives at the local level, it is hard to assess whether the nation as a whole is ready for a serious, sustained assault on the achievement gap. Daniel Yankelovich, a national pollster, observes that public opinion on race will be a major factor in any such effort.

While Americans are more accepting of racial and ethnic diversity, he contends that very acceptance could make them less eager to attack inequalities.

"In the past, civil rights leaders were able to play on guilt," Mr. Yankelovich argued. "As people become more accepting, they don't feel guilty. Guilt is no longer operative."

Instead, he and others suggest, stereotypes must be altered by educators or in the media.

"There's the mythology that all blacks have to be less intelligent than all whites," he said. "If you have stories of blacks outperforming whites, you cast doubts on the theory."

The first and biggest hurdle, he said, may be a simple conversation about the uncomfortable issue of race. "We have gone about as far as we can go without having a real dialogue with each other," Mr. Yankelovich said. "It seems we need that."

- **Part 1** *March 15, 2000* : Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education.

Part 2 *March 22, 2000* : Why do the achievement gaps persist? Some blame it on teachers; others say parents need to be stronger advocates and cut down on TV time. In a Korean-American community, parents take no chances when it comes to their children's education.

Part 3 *March 29, 2000* : Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families may offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

Part 4 *April 5, 2000* : There are no sure answers, but some experts say better teaching, smaller classes, the right schoolwide improvement program, and fairer allocation of resources can shrink achievement gaps. A Houston-area district has some answers of its own.

Coverage of urban education is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

On the Web

Read "Closing the Achievement Gaps in Urban Schools: A Survey of Academic Progress and Promising Practices in the Great City Schools," October 1999.

"Closing the Achievement Gap Requires Multiple Solutions," from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

The National Alliance of Black School Educators seeks to improve the educational accomplishments of African American youth.

PHOTOS: John Jackson is one of only two African-American students in the AP physics class at Shaker Heights High School in Ohio. The district is trying to push more minority students into higher-level coursework.
—Bruce Zake

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March 15, 2000

Views Over the Gap

Education Week

"When I see those gaps, my heart goes out to the kids. They are our future. I wonder what's going wrong."
—Demetra Skinner, Teacher, Hambrick Middle School, Aldine, Texas

"There is a national interest in closing the achievement gap. ... Our collective self-interest is at stake."
—Raul Yzaguirre, President, National Council of La Raza

"Just because schools didn't cause the problem doesn't mean they can't solve it."
—Meredith Phillips, Professor, UCLA

"I don't feel a bond with other students in my class."
—Courtney Conwell, 8th Grade Honors Student, Shaker Heights Middle School

"The stakes for underdevelopment in 2000 are much high than they were in 1900."
—Edmund W. Gordon, professor emeritus, Yale University

"Black kids get twice as many of our worst teachers."
—Kati Haycock, Executive Director, The Education Trust

"I used to think white kids were smarter than me. Now I'm ashamed I ever thought that."
—John Jackson, Senior, Shaker Heights (Ohio) High School

"If seeking excellence is acting white, then what is acting black?"
—James Edward Harris, President, Monclair, N.J. branch of the NAACP

Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

March 15, 2000

As the U.S. Hispanic Population Soars, Raising Performance Becomes Vital

By Robert C. Johnston
Education Week

The numbers are startling: Fewer than two Hispanic students in 10 score at the "proficient" level or above on a national reading test—well below their white and Asian-American peers. Hispanic children are less likely to go to preschool and more likely to drop out of high school.

And, by 2030, they will make up one out of every four students in the nation's K-12 schools. As Hispanics' share of the school-age population—and of the U.S. population overall—grows, so too will the pressure to narrow the academic-performance gap.

A failure to do so, many educators and Hispanic leaders say, will have troubling consequences not only for those children but for the country as a whole.

"Increasingly, we'll depend on [Hispanics'] ability to produce goods and services," said Raul Yzaguirre, the president of the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic advocacy group in Washington. "If we don't do a good job of educating them, our economic security, our standard of living, our ability to support retirees is going to diminish."

To be sure, Hispanic students have made modest but steady gains in recent years, often outpacing African-Americans on local and national academic measures.

But much room for improvement remains. For example, on the 1998 reading test given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 16 percent of Hispanic 8th graders scored at the proficient level or above, compared with 45 percent of white students and 40 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders. For black students, the proportion was 12 percent.

Loosely Defined Category

"Hispanics" are in fact a diverse collection of groups. Federal statistics from 1997 show that 64 percent of Hispanics were Mexican-American, 13 percent were from Central and South America or the Caribbean, 11 percent were Puerto Rican, and 5 percent were of Cuban origin. Seven percent were classified as "other."

For educators and policymakers, such diversity complicates efforts to come up with broad plans for dealing with the achievement gap. For example, Cubans, who began arriving in the United States in large numbers after their country's 1959 revolution, generally have had stronger educational backgrounds than those of more recent immigrants from Central America of the past three decades.

But when looked at as a whole, Hispanics show some troubling trends. According to 1998 federal data, a much higher proportion—29 percent—of Hispanics ages 16 to 24 were not in school and had not finished high school, compared with 8 percent for whites, 14 percent for blacks, and 4 percent for Asian/Pacific Islanders.

In addition, the Hispanic dropout rate for 16- to 24-year-olds born outside the United States was 44 percent, vs. just 7.2 percent for non-Hispanics, according to a 1999 report from the

National Center for Education Statistics. The report suggests the dropout rate is high because many Hispanic immigrants arrive beyond typical high school age, emigrate solely to work, or are deterred by language barriers.

Another view is that the increasing use of tests to determine whether students are promoted to the next grade or graduate may be forcing out of school a disproportionate number of students with limited English proficiency.

Tests have "become door closers rather than door openers," contended Blandina Cardenas, the director of the Center for Hispanic Research at the University of Texas at San Antonio. "Large assessments are primitive," she added. "I'm not sure they're the tools we need to understand learning potential of any student at any level."

Ms. Cardenas concedes, however, that the state's test-driven accountability system, which includes school and district ratings, has at least one advantage for minority students: "It has forced school districts to bring to light the patterns of underachievement that had been accepted as the way things were supposed to be for too long."

Economics

Language is inextricably linked to test success, and may be the most academically significant and politically contentious issues for students of Spanish-speaking backgrounds and the schools they attend. And it represents the major difference between efforts to reduce the achievement gap among African-Americans and policies directed toward Hispanics.

California has taken a controversial and closely watched step toward addressing language proficiency in schools. Californians in 1998 passed a ballot measure that barred most bilingual education in public schools and replaced it with English-only instruction.

While it's too early to fully assess whether the approach is making a difference, Ms. Cardenas worries that the language debate obscures other issues. "The things that hold back Latinos have more to do with economics and disparities in resources," she argued.

A 1998 review of federal data by the Council of La Raza found that between 1990 and 1996, median family incomes fell 7 percent for Hispanics, while climbing 1 percent for non-Hispanic whites and 3 percent for blacks. In 1998, more than half of all white and black 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in preschool, compared with fewer than 40 percent of Hispanics, the group reported recently.

In spite of such trends, observers note that Hispanic students have inched up overall in many categories on the NAEP exams, and have narrowed the gap with white students on some state- mandated exams, notably in Texas.

Increasing those gains is a priority in many states as well as for the federal government, and President Clinton has launched a White House Initiative on Educational Achievement for Hispanic Americans to study the issue.

Sarita Brown, the project's executive director, said parents must play a vital role in any solutions. She faults well-intentioned people for a perception that Hispanic parents do not value education as much as those from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Perpetuating that idea, she said, allows schools to escape responsibility for the failure of Hispanic students.

"Parents don't need a public relations campaign to tell them their kids need a good education," she declared. "They need solid information about what a good education is, what their rights are, and how to access that information."

On the Web

Learn more about the National Council of La Raza. See its education page and visit its action center.

The White House Initiative on Education Excellence for Hispanic Americans published a 1996 report, *Our Nation on the Fault Line: Hispanic American Education* , which highlights problems facing Hispanic Americans in the education system, and *What Works for Latino Youth* , a 1999 directory of programs that are recommended for helping Latino youth with academics and other aspects of life. (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

PHOTOS: Third graders at Saul Martinez Elementary School in Mecca, Calif., write essays in Spanish during a January lesson. California has a burgeoning Hispanic population.
—AP/Wide World

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Who Is 'Asian'? Cultural Differences Defy Simple Categories

By Robert C. Johnston
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In 1998-99, Asian-Americans accounted for just 8 percent of California's K-12 enrollment, yet represented 40 percent of the student body at one of the state's most highly regarded institutions of higher education, the University of California, Berkeley.

Such success stories among this small but growing minority of the U.S. population abound. "It is more advantageous to be Asian than to be wealthy, to have nondivorced parents, or to have a mother who is able to stay home full time," writes Laurence Steinberg, a researcher at Temple University in Philadelphia, in his 1996 book *Beyond the Classroom* .

Not every Asian group performs equally well, however. The stunning numbers can overstate the success of low-performing and high-poverty subgroups, such as Cambodians and Laotians, that get lumped into the broad category of Asian-American.

Experts see an important lesson there: The simplifications used in creating such categories can mask more complex issues and confound attempts to recognize and respond to different educational needs.

In the same vein, above-average performance by other ethnic subgroups, such as Caribbean blacks, can be missed.

The way to avoid such generalizations, many policymakers and educators say, is to recognize the complexities and make better data available to educators.

The more detailed the information, the more useful it is, said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization of urban districts based in Washington. "Disaggregating performance data by race is extremely helpful for most school districts," he said.

The Seattle school district, for example, breaks out its annual test scores into 18 categories, thus allowing officials to track and address the educational needs of specific groups.

Such detailed reporting reveals, for example, that students of Japanese and Korean descent tend to outperform their Asian peers from China, the Philippines, and Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam.

"It's important for educators, but also for the community, to know these things," said Lynn Steinberg, a spokeswoman for the 47,000-student district.

San Francisco uses nine ethnic groups in most of its reporting, including four for students of Asian ancestry. "If there are different achievement gaps, we want to know about it," said Frank Chong, the vice president of the San Francisco board of education. "The Asian-American community is not monolithic."

When data are separated in detail, interesting differences can show up. Not only can those

differences help educators tailor school needs and resources, but they also can help alter stereotypes and dangerous overgeneralizations.

Diversity Within Groups

For example, all Hispanics are not heading in the same direction when it comes to college readiness. Nationwide, college-bound students of Puerto Rican descent increased their average SAT verbal scores 18 points, to 455 on an 800-point scale, between 1989 and 1999, while the same average score for Mexican-Americans fell by 9 points, to 453, according to trend data published by the College Board.

Another subgroup whose achievement is hard to track is that of Caribbean-born blacks, who are believed to perform at higher levels than African-Americans who are born in the United States, according to a recent report by the College Board. While there are many references to such trends in education research, specific data are hard to find, however—leaving educators with little to go on in explaining or dealing with the different groups of students.

When large-scale reporting data are available and broken down in detail, some commonly held beliefs come into question.

Ruben G. Rumbaut, a Michigan State University sociology professor and education researcher, was one of three scholars who studied the school performance of 5,262 children of immigrant parents from 77 different nationalities, most of them in the Miami or San Diego areas, from 1992 to 1996.

One of the researchers' major conclusions was that Cuban-American students from the most recently arrived parents made up the lowest-achieving group of immigrant children in the study—a stark contrast to the conventional wisdom that Cubans outperform their Hispanic peers.

"The discrepancy may be labeled the Cuban-American paradox," the researchers write in a forthcoming book, *Legacies: The Story of the New Second Generation*. They attribute the difference in part to a less welcoming attitude toward recent Cuban refugees, combined with their lower socioeconomic standing compared with that of Cubans who arrived in the years immediately following the 1959 revolution there.

Mr. Rumbaut argues that including Cubans with all Hispanics has helped educators miss the problems of newer Cuban families whose needs get overlooked. "This research absolutely underscores the absurdity of lumping scores of national-origin groups from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and elsewhere into 'made-in-the-U.S.A., one-size-fits-all,' racialized categories," he said.

On the Web

The Asia Society sponsors the Asian Educational Resource Center and Asia Source.

Read "Asian-American Children: What Teachers Should Know," a June 1994 ERIC Digest.

Read a short biography of Laurence Steinberg as well as a list of his books, courtesy of Temple University.

Review the findings of the College Board's *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement.* (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

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The Achievement Gap

Even in Well-Off Suburbs, Minority Achievement Lags

By Debra Viadero
Education Week

Shaker Heights, Ohio

If there is a school district in America where an African-American student should be able to excel, this affluent Cleveland suburb is probably it. Shaker Heights prides itself as a model of racial harmony, and black children—many of them from professional families—make up just over half the school population. In the solid embrace of this community's handsome, red-brick schools, students enjoy teachers with master's degrees or better, computerized classrooms, and a menu of rigorous academic courses that rivals that of a small college.

So why is John Jackson one of just two African-Americans in the Advanced Placement physics class at Shaker Heights High School?

The answer is that Shaker Heights is struggling with a problem that is vexing middle-class districts all across the country: the underrepresentation of minority students among "the best and the brightest." While low-achieving black and Hispanic students made great strides nationwide throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s in narrowing the gap that separates them from their white and Asian-American counterparts, the gulf at the upper reaches of the achievement spectrum remains as solid as the school architecture here in Shaker Heights.

"A lot of African-American students believe what's required of them isn't the same as what's required of white students," said Mr. Jackson, a lanky senior with an acceptance to Harvard University already under his belt.

Many researchers and scholars, agree.

Nationwide, black and Hispanic students constitute only about one in 10 of the students scoring at the topmost level on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in reading, math, and science, according to a report last year from the College Board. What was even more puzzling, the researchers found, was that the racial disparities were greater among students whose parents had college degrees than they were for students whose parents had never graduated from high school.

And, even though black students are now enrolling in college at nearly the same rate as their white peers, far fewer make it through the other end of the higher education pipeline with a degree in hand.

Too troubling to ignore, those kinds of statistics have moved once-taboo discussions of the achievement gap onto educators' agendas nationwide. Shaker Heights last year joined with school officials in Evanston, Ill., Montclair, N.J., and 12 other suburban communities to try to tackle the problem.

"If those in relatively affluent communities serving kids where all the odds are not against them can't crack the problem, there are many who will say it can't be done because the kids

are not capable," Edmund W. Gordon, a Yale University psychology professor, said in a speech last year to officials from those districts.

Concern is high because the stakes are high. Many of the nation's future leaders will be drawn from these pools of high-achieving children, and a continuing underrepresentation of minority students could thwart long-standing efforts to better integrate the highest levels of business, academe, and government.

What's more, with affirmative action policies under attack in colleges and universities nationwide, there is widespread agreement that improving test scores among African-Americans is one of public education's most pressing concerns.

"Until many more underrepresented minority families from disadvantaged, middle-class, and upper-middle-class families are very successful educationally," the College Board warns in its 1999 report, "it will be virtually impossible to integrate our society's institutions."

Diversity Welcomed

The frustration of Shaker Heights is that things were supposed to be different here.

In the 1960s, when courts were beginning to force school districts to integrate, residents of this planned community on a rise above urban Cleveland voluntarily agreed to bus their children across the 61/2-square-mile district to maintain racial balance in their schools.

The district reorganized again in 1994 when it became apparent that the racial balance was tipping dangerously in a couple of Shaker Heights' eight schools.

Elsewhere, such changes have prompted white parents to leave for whiter, even more suburban schools. Not here.

Now, every school in Shaker Heights pretty much reflects the district's overall racial mix—52 percent black, 42 percent white, and a smattering of Asian-American and multiracial children. And school officials say resources and highly qualified teachers are evenly split among them.

"People who choose to move here know that their children are going to go to school in classrooms where there are children of different races," said Mark Freeman, the superintendent of the 5,600-student district.

What's more, poverty is not a big factor here—only 8 percent of the students come from families poor enough to qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. But educators here say that figure may be low, since the schools do not provide hot lunches in grades K-4.

In fact, African-American students in this top-rated school system really do fare better than average. Some, like Mr. Jackson, even excel. On the 1998 SAT, taken by nearly three-quarters of seniors here, African-American students scored 100 points above the average for black students nationwide.

White students, however, do even better, scoring 150 points above the average for their race on the same test. Overall, Shaker Heights' black students lag behind their white classmates on the college-admissions test by more than 200 points, a sizable chunk on a scale of 1600.

One reason for such disparities may be the racial makeup in high-powered academic classes like AP physics. Studies for years have shown that the academic rigor of the courses students pursue in high school can be the single most important predictor of college success—more important even than grade point averages and test scores.

The district two years ago opened up enrollment in top-level classes to any student who wants to sign up. Before that, school officials used teacher recommendations, student test

scores, and student work to decide who would be admitted to AP and honors classes. Even so, black students remain a tiny minority in many advanced classes at the district's only high school.

Mr. Jackson, for example, has no more than three other black classmates in his other two AP classes—English and American government.

"None of your friends are there and, if you're African-American, you may not know half the kids," explains Mr. Jackson. "When it comes time to study they have their group and it's like you're on the outside looking in."

Overall, about a third of the students in the honors and AP courses at Shaker Heights High are now African-American. (In all, the high school offers four levels of courses: general, college-placement, honors, and Advanced Placement.)

"We see the same two or three African-American kids in every class," said Beth Dolinsky, a white senior with a heavy schedule of AP and honors classes. "It's almost a shame there aren't more."

Alarmed by its own numbers, the district two years ago began a concerted effort to beef up its small contingent of high-achieving black students. That campaign has met with some success. The percentage of black students in AP classes at the high school, once hovering around 10 percent, has risen to 16 percent.

Progress is also evident in classes like Terry Pollack's Advancement Placement U.S. history class. Seven of the 22 students this semester, for example, are African-American.

"I think you have to create a critical mass of black students in every honors and AP course," said Mr. Pollack, a veteran educator with 39 years in the field. "Then students don't feel so isolated."

And that, he believes, doesn't mean sitting back and waiting for minority students to sign up. With the district's support, Mr. Pollack has become a one-man campaign for encouraging more African-American students to take the tough academic road. He tries to demystify AP courses for students and parents by staging fairs and inviting Mr. Jackson and other successful black students to speak about their experiences.

On most afternoons, Mr. Pollack also visits the middle school to teach students the skills in critical thinking, note-taking, and thesis development that they'll need in the high school's more academically oriented courses. He occasionally grades middle schoolers' homework papers to show them how much harder they'll have to work if they choose the tougher curriculum.

For those who do, Mr. Pollack and a handful of other AP teachers provide after-school support seminars teaching the same kinds of study skills.

Black male students such as Mr. Jackson have banded together to serve as role models and mentors to younger boys who are struggling academically. The Minority Achievement Committee, or MAC, scholars, who come to school dressed in ties and white shirts for their meetings, cut impressive figures amid the sea of T-shirts and baggy jeans their classmates are wearing. The success of that program has since inspired a MAC sisters' programs for female students and a corps of junior MAC scholars in the middle school.

National Efforts

Nationwide, educators and African-American leaders say, these kinds of multi-pronged efforts may be what it takes to raise achievement among minority students. The National Urban League in 1998, for example, set up its own version of MAC scholars, the Thurgood Marshall Achievers. Numbering more than 5,000 members now, the group is a national honor

society for black students, male and female, in grades 3-11.

And the efforts undertaken by the 15 districts in the Minority Achievement Network range from stepped-up literacy efforts to free college-entrance test-preparation classes for minority students in high school. Network members collaborate to share their experiences with these programs, to develop common techniques for gathering data on minority students' progress, and to make better use of resources.

But the College Board, whose 1999 report, *Reaching the Top* , focuses on this problem, says such efforts are few and far between. Nationwide, most programs aimed at raising minority achievement have focused on the lowest-performing students rather than search for ways to boost potential high achievers.

In Shaker Heights, educators have launched after-school literacy clubs, provided teachers with diversity training, begun summer and Saturday school programs, and offered professional development to private day-care providers in the community. Even the Shaker Heights recreation department does its share, offering foreign-language classes in settings that students may find less daunting than regular classrooms.

"We've been relentless in terms of pursuing closing the achievement gap," said Jim Paces, the executive director of curriculum for the district.

Subtle Barriers

But not relentless enough, according to some of the community's minority parents. They say their children's access to challenging academic work is often blocked in subtle ways. Black males, in particular, miss out on teacher recommendations for higher-track courses and enrichment programs because they are less docile than female classmates, these parents say.

Since her son, Jabari, started 1st grade in the district seven years ago, Cheryl Johnson says, she has found herself arguing with teachers on more than one occasion to make sure her son got into a particular enrichment class, or cajoling teachers to hold him to high standards. "Sometimes less is accepted on the part of African-American students," Ms. Johnson said.

An urban planner by profession, she is among a group of black parents who banded together in 1997 to work on raising the performance of black students in the district. Since then, the group has held town meetings, parenting seminars, and summer enrichment programs. But, these parents claim, the low expectations some teachers have for black students are hard to eradicate and can lead to a de facto tracking system.

"I was at the middle school the first morning the bell rang to go to class," Ms. Johnson said, "and I saw a sea of African-American students going one way and a sea of white students going another way and I thought, 'What is this?' You can't tell me none of those African-American children are equipped to be challenged in the same way."

Changing Parents' Attitudes

But from his post as an assistant principal at the middle school, Lindsay Florence also sees the other side of the coin. He says African-American parents are often reluctant to push for their children the way Ms. Johnson has and the way many white parents do.

"You have a population of students here whose parents moved from the inner city to the inner-ring suburbs, and they have a sense of accomplishment about that—and rightly so," says the 35-year old administrator, who is African-American. "But they don't fully understand what it takes to help their children be successful. I think they kind of rest on the laurels of the school district."

Anecdotal information from other well-to-do districts, such as Montclair, N.J., suggests that African-American parents in many communities may be less likely to aggressively advocate for

their children in school.

"The difficulty with this in this school district," added Superintendent Freeman, "is that our weaker students are racially identifiable. Those students—or probably not as many of them—are not going to be electing to take more rigorous courses."

"Does this result in a tracking situation? Yes, it does," he continued. "One alternative, which we are not going to do, is to eliminate all the honors and AP courses. What we have elected to do instead is to create the best possible environment—a variety of special programs to support students who want to take those classes.

"Have we been successful? Yes. Have we reached the goals we want? No."

Until those goals are reached, black students may still find themselves feeling isolated in tough academic classes. Students who have been there say the experience is intimidating. "I don't feel a bond with other students in my class," said Courtney Conwell, an 8th grade honors student. "I feel like they look at me like, 'she don't know what she's doing.'"

And, until students like her learn otherwise, potentially harmful stereotypes may take root about their own academic potential. As 8th grader Stephanie Glenn put it, "Sometimes it seems it comes naturally to white people to do their homework and stuff."

Another problem: A lot of Shaker Heights' black students don't see the need for challenging coursework.

"It's like some of our African-American students really don't buy into the power of a good education," said Danny Young, a guidance counselor at the middle school. "If they watch MTV or sports, they see people a little older than them, and they are filthy rich. Very rarely do I get an African-American who tells me 'I want to be a basketball player, and if I can't do that I want to be a teacher or a lawyer or whatever.'"

What's more, some students equate academic success with "acting white"—particularly if successful black students use standard English or socialize with white classmates in the hallways or outside of school.

Some minority students also say they eschew the tougher classes because, like most adolescents, they would rather be with their friends. Despite the racial balance in its schools, Shaker Heights' black and white families often lead separate lives. Students typically sit at all-black and all-white tables in the cafeteria. Many of the district's African-American families are clustered in neighborhoods at the south end of town and, as a result, blacks and whites—even in Shaker Heights—sometimes go about their day-to-day business in separate worlds, frequenting different grocery stores, churches, and eateries.

"Some black people feel the need to be accepted by another group of black people," said Cheryl Blackwell, a senior who is bound for Syracuse University in New York state next fall. "They don't lower their academic achievement, but they don't go as high as they could."

But black parents say the peer-pressure theory gets more credibility than it deserves.

"You have to be careful about blaming the victim," said Debra Quarles, a mother of two Shaker Heights students. "That's like saying poor people are poor because they just like not having money." And, she says, blaming students lets educators off the hook.

Being Popular

In an effort to probe the question of peer pressure more deeply, the district has commissioned academics from the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard University to study its students. In one such survey, Ronald F. Ferguson, a lecturer and senior research associate at Harvard, found that black and white students had different ideas about what it takes to be

popular.

Being tough, for example, was rated high among black middle and high school students, but white students gave that characteristic a low score. Being self-confident and outgoing in academic matters, on the other hand, showed the opposite pattern. White students gave those qualities high marks. Black students rated them low.

"It seems to be that the things that foster popularity in African-American students are more dissimilar from a style that is consonant with academic achievement than is true for whites," Mr. Ferguson said.

The district's own research also turned up differences in mobility rates between student racial groups. Two-thirds of African-American kindergartners, one study found, had moved out of the district before reaching 8th grade. In comparison, only a third of the white students left over the same time span. It's harder for students to keep up in school when they have to move to schools that aren't on the same page—or even in the same textbook.

But John Jackson's success suggests there is still cause for optimism. Both of his parents are college-educated, and they were savvy enough to push for him to be placed in enrichment and honors classes as early as elementary school.

Yet he remembers how uncomfortable he felt to be the only black student in those classes, the kid who was left out when students broke into study groups or chose lab partners.

"I used to think white kids were smarter than me," he said. Over the years, though, he learned differently "Now I'm ashamed I ever thought that."

On the Web

Visit Shaker Heights schools.

PHOTOS: At Shaker Heights Middle School, Danny Young, left, a guidance counselor, and Assistant Principal Lindsay Florence try to interest minority students in taking higher-level courses in high school.
—Bruce Zake

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